DISPARATE
MINDS
DEADSPACE

# Deadspace

**A *Disparate Minds* Short Story**

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*"An artist cannot fail, it is a success to be one.."*
***— Charles Horton Cooley***

# "Deadspace"

## *Vignettes from a City of Fear, How We Are What We Are, The Measure of a Man, Fragments and Earworms*

* * *

## Two

The place was an abattoir, once. You probably can't imagine. It was all mortar and chains and blood-black spray from all the meat. The air was shimmery and red, like the summer sun. And it was dark.

Right now, it's not that, they cleaned it out. You have to be careful when cleaning a place out in Avenue, Billings notes. He remembers having to go through the concrete metal corridors. He remembers carrying out the conveyor belts and meat hooks. But it would have been worse to leave the building alone, let it *fester,* because there are stories about that. Billings takes a swig of his beer. He passes it to Scott. He drinks too.

They usually don't say much. Billings's favourite kind of friends don't always need to. The moment stays. Scott passes the liquor back.

*Shiiit,* Billings likes this place. A country boy like him can appreciate the bleakness of it to begin with, but its new purpose is far more appealing than Billings had expected when he was hired.

It's a studio now. Paintings rest on the walls, works in progress on the tables. Deft, high-quality work in a myriad of styles — psychedelia, cubism, realism; one painter has even taken to imitating the expressionism of Rothko.

Billings doesn't know crap about paintin'. But he thinks that they all look mighty fine. There's a potent whiff of thick paint in the air. It smells bad but good.

The place is electrically lit, a rarity for a studio of this kind. But the artists seem to enjoy it, and Billings does too. He comes here often to watch them work. There aren't many of them right now. A little slip of a girl in the corner,

painting a brown and black sludge. An older man and woman laughing into each other's ears as they paint the big blocky squares of a Newspaper Sunday-Strip. Billings should feel left out, but this — this is the location.

Billings and Scott leave.

The street outside the studio is normal. There's sidewalks and everything. It's dirty, speckled and smeared with black paint and oil. Abandoned cans of Coca-Cola and Gevity litter the pavement. They walk by the cars parked at their workplaces, and they don't say anything to each other, but they think, they think about how life is so different here, but at the same time it's just the same. They lift things and get paid less than their worth. They walk home to shitty apartments. They don't say how they feel.

One of the cars is playing music on its old fashioned radio a little bit too loudly. The tinny electronic-ness of it reverberates through the air, but it's a dreamy, quiet sound. Listen.

*I've seen one hypnotised today.*
*you see them burn in different ways*
*you say that we'll return someday*
*but I know there's hell to pay*

*and we*
*shine into the dark*
*we learn*
*until the final part*
*and I*
*don't know what it means.*
*won't you*
*won't someone just tell me*

*I see us rattle in the shade*
*our souls aren't the same old shape*
*while I know you got me made*
*I try I try I just ain't brave*

*and we*
*shine into the dark*
*we learn*
*until the final part*
*and I*
*don't know what it means.*

*won't you*
*won't someone just tell me*

The song fades as they go along the street, away from the car. Scott hums the sombre tune of it under his breath. And they go on to the next job.

* * *

## Three

The brush dances across the canvas in Serena's hands. She's painting. People say she's good. She doesn't think so.

The paint drips, that's the annoying thing, it's very runny paint, so there isn't much room for precision. That's why Serena's moved on from precision. Her most recent canvas is red. Crimson, vermillion, carmine. Red in shades, red in hues. Dissonance in red.

She waits for layers to dry and she paints on more. She tries to swirl it, letting it guide her. There are no straight lines on the canvas, no rigidity. That's because there's no rigidity in the colour red. It's not like brown, purple or grey. *Those* have rigidity, sometimes. But red flows. Everything red flows, like love, like blood, like flower petals.

People ask why she's doing red. She's not sure. She's doing blue next, probably. Maybe yellow. Clive doesn't want her to do yellow next, he thinks a lot of shades of yellow are quite gross. But Serena's been interested in *gross* lately. Maybe some ugly shades of blue.

She loves Avenue. People look at her like she's crazy, and maybe she isn't entirely right to love Avenue, but this is where she grew up, in the important years. Since she was four. Since forever. She's not blind. Avenue is trash. But it's her trash, her junk, and the precise placement of the trash and the junk becomes something else after a while. A still life. There's something in the dirt, the soda bottles on the pavement, the twisted rebar, the whole ashen aesthetic of the place.

She talks with June lately, and June says (jokingly) that it's totally Stockholm, there's no way someone could like a place like this, all broken glass and cement.

Serena got a little offended at that, but she put it to the side.

People assume that she's an adult and that she's so mature and responsible and Serena hates it because she's still the same as she always was.

She's still that girl that everyone laughed at in the school halls, calling her edgy, callng her goth and lame. She's still there.

She still just feels like a kid, you know?

Her phone rings. She answers, not looking at the number. "Hello?" she says. There is nothing but silence in return. What kind of wrong number is that? She smiles to herself, and she hangs up.

She doesn't think of this again for a long time. But of course, this is how it starts.

* * *

## Twenty-One

Also, Serena is burning. She is not on fire, but she is burning.

She's sitting on the floor, and she's nearly curled up into a little ball. She's too large, so she can't make a real ball like she used to when she was overstimulated. Her throat is raw from screaming, and her eyes are red and wet. There is something in her hands.

The woman stands over her, uncaring. Isn't that the way it always is? Doesn't *anyone* care about her? Doesn't *anyone* get it?

This is her life! She's — she's done what she's had to do, and just because —

Oh, she can hardly put it into words —

— she's too angry and tight and exhausted.

But it is expected of her. It's all expected of her, isn't it? Everyone has some idea about what she's meant to be, everyone but her. Even if they don't give a shit.

*Calm down,* they'll say. *You're throwing a hissy fit.* Serena *knows*! She knows what she's doing, but it's not like she can stop it! She can't stop thinking!

The rage hasn't died down. She feels ashamed now, a little more reticent but the need, the feeling of *I need to punch something* is still there.

"I don't want to talk about it," Serena says, her head tilted downward. There are tears in her eyes, and they stay there, like dewdrops. Her voice is soft, delicate, fluttery. But she is still mad.

There's so much blood on her hands. It's not hers. There is even more blood on the screwdriver in her right hand. It was plunged into something, over and over.

Serena murmurs and hisses the unacceptable nothings. Above her, Anthea continues to stare down, not at her, not at the bloody body over by the bench, but at the screwdriver.

* * *

## Eight

It is an average day.

Things have been happening, and they have not all been unpleasant. Some people think Randy is unpleasant, but they're wrong. He's just not a people person. Oh, he can grin with the best of 'em, he can put a smile on that stubbly face of his and it will look perfectly genuine, because it *is*, but it can also be a hollow expression, and no one can tell. He's been looking at people, been the man at the front desk for far too long — he knows all the minute little curves and flaps of skin on the face, the minor flicks and creases that mean one thing means another. He'd be an excellent poker player. But that would require people, and that's not what he's doing right now.

Before Avenue, a long time ago now, his old football coach used to call him *Lurch* — you know, from *The Addams Family*. Jesus Christ, some people. The insensitivity! There were days he thought about his old football coach, thought about pummeling him into the dirt. Blowing his face off with an untraceable glock. But those are just fantasies, everyone has those, he thinks.

Today, he's got himself his little gas station, and he sells chips — that's *American* chips; God he hates the Brits — he sells chips and other crap, the branded stuff, like Frito-Lay, which he gets from an unmarked van down by the powerline that no matter how many times he pillages from, is always full. That's what he does by day.

And if you know him well, you can come by at night, and he'll give you what he *really* sells.

He makes strawberry porridge.

Best in the world. He serves it with Brie and Olives, and he makes it *fancy*.

Usually he eats it by himself, because people just aren't good enough for it. But he hopes someday he'll meet a nice girl who won't argue like his ex-wife, and he can feed her the strawberry porridge, as much as she wants. A man's got to have dreams.

The porridge is the most delicious thing he knows, his glory, his talent, something he puts his soul into. He sips the porridge, looking out the gas station window.

He spits it out onto the linoleum floor.

It is nothing but thick oily grey paint.

Glop.

He's not a sensitive man, but he cries.

* * *

## Six

They arrive, not out of the mist, not ominously rising from the earth, or descending from above, but in a rusty-red pickup truck that is very much like them. It doesn't so much flicker as it undulates; at times its shape is wrong before it reasserts itself, and it is too smooth, the entirely textureless effect that gives heed in the mind to something digital.

They park in the town square, almost as a declaration, as the perfect nuclear family — a mother, son, father and daughter — disembark from their carriage. The son carries what is meant to be a dog. It is auburn-brown, and far too long.

Word travels fast, and the arrival becomes a cultural event. Everyone tells everyone they have to see! And soon, everyone who's anyone is in the town square, looking at the (people?) who have declared themselves to be the Smithsons.

It is a little spectacle. June can't remember when Avenue has come together like this. Avenue keeps to itself. But suddenly, everyone is together, and it feels almost like an omen. It's something she's never felt before. She's not sure she's even seen Anthea, Wick, Serena, Todd and Terrance all in one place before, let alone the rest of town. And they *live* together. Or at least, she, Wick and Serena do.

The Smithsons stand expectantly. They are remarkably still. Even the children. June knows what they are, but she can't bear to say it. Nobody else seems to even understand.

An enormous amount of time passes, all of it used for staring at the Smithsons, who remain there. Some people leave. Most stay, and continue to stare, or talk to their friends, since everyone's here, after all. It's forty-five minutes later on the dot when the Smithsons make their announcements.

"HeLlO," the Father says. "wE ArE ThE SmItHsOnS. wE ArE HeRe nOw. We aRe hApPy tO Be iN ThE NeIgHbOrHoOd."

There is a turbulent pause as the people begin to take this in. Even if they somehow already knew that these were the Smithsons. Perhaps it's how they're dressed.

The father eventually begins speaking again. His voice is that of an internet text-to-speech program, entirely robotic but attempting to sound human. "I Am jOhN SmItHsOn, 42 YeArS OlD, wOrK As a pRoJeCt mAnAgEr aT A LoCaL EnGiNeErInG FiRm. He eNjOyS PlAyInG GoLf oN WeEkEnDs aNd cOaChInG HiS SoN'S SoCcEr tEaM."

The Mother steps forward. "i aM SaRaH SmItHsOn, 40 YeArS OlD, wOrK pArT-TiMe aS A NuRsE At tHe lOcAl hOsPiTaL. sHe lOvEs gArDeNiNg aNd vOlUnTeErS At tHe sChOoL LiBrArY In hEr fReE TiMe."

As if this is not enough of an assault, the first of the two children steps forward. It is the Son. "MiChAeL SmItHsOn, 14 YeArS OlD, iS In 9Th gRaDe. He's pAsSiOnAtE AbOuT BaSkEtBaLl aNd dReAmS Of pLaYiNg pRoFeSsIoNaLlY OnE DaY. hE'S AlSo a sTrAiGhT-A StUdEnT AnD EnJoYs vIdEo gAmEs wItH HiS FrIeNdS."

Finally — or at least, all present hope it's the end of it — the Daughter speaks.

"EmIlY SmItHsOn, 10 YeArS OlD, iS In 5Th gRaDe. ShE LoVeS ReAdInG BoOkS, eSpEcIaLlY FaNtAsY NoVeLs, AnD Is pArT Of tHe sChOoL'S DrAmA ClUb. ShE HaS A PeT CaT NaMeD WhIsKeRs." She says, holding out the dog that was hitherto in Michael's hands.

June would laugh, but — but this is different from ChatGPT or those drawing apps or whatever. It's — it's in front of her. Standing there. Expectantly. As if waiting to be let in.

Serena doesn't recognise it, June realises. None of them do. They've — they've never seen AI generation before, have they? It's a recent thing. Does Avenue have it? June isn't sure. The crowd of people looks mildly disturbed, mildly uncomfortable, but there's no trace of recognition, of *understanding* on their dismayed faces.

Anthea, however, is — as always — reacting differently from the crowd. She has lost her composure, crouched down, face near the pavement. She's muttering something about Haunt Points. And when she looks up, she looks *horrified.*

* * *

"What do we do?" Wick asks, as they walk back to the bar, the faceless artificial people fresh in their mind.

June makes an ineffectual suggestion about ad-blockers. Serena shrugs. Anthea's composure is still slightly shaken.

The four of them walk in relative silence.

What can they do? Should they do anything? Serena knows their purview is vague — Avenue is usually a licence to do what you want as it is — you aren't really gonna go anywhere.

But they're four people living in shitty lodgings upstairs in a bar. They aren't the law. And there's not been any law broken, as disconcerting as the afternoon has been. People have come to town. That's all that's happened. And the sun will rise the next morning, just the same as before.

Serena takes these things in her stride. But problems are usually a mission. Problems are usually clear. However difficult the task at hand is, Serena is used to knowing the next impossible step.

*Piss,* she thinks. *How does a girl end up with something like this?*

She wants that kick of adrenaline in her chest. May as well go home, read the new Stephen King or something. Least then she'll know what to be scared of.

Why is it only *sometimes* nice to be scared?

"Tomorrow morning," Anthea begins, and there is a splinter of hope in Serena's chest as she eagerly awaits Anthea's grand strategy. "—Terrance wants you to clean up the bar. If we're going to keep living there, we're going to have to pull our weight."

Scared *and* bored, Serena thinks, ruffling her hair. Tomorrow's just another directionless day.

* * *

## Seven

Serena and Todd are at the bar. Serena can't drink, obviously, but the last person who told her she couldn't *sit* with everyone at the bar got a broken finger. Todd was frightened of that — although Todd has been consistently frightened of most things. He's usually mild and indecisive. He couldn't possibly comment negatively on anyone. (He's British.) All the same, something hangs over him. He sips his tea, and Terrance scowls to himself a little, wishing that if people would go to a bar, they would get some goddamn alcohol.

There is something else that's unspoken. Todd is more nervous than usual, Serena notices. She can see it in his hands, which twitch every now and then as he sets down the tea cup.

"I don't like them," he says eventually, in a very soft voice.

Serena knows what he's talking about immediately. It's all *anyone* talks about. The new faceless neighbours.

"I don't like 'em either."

"It's just the way they speak, isn't it?" Todd says, as if he's been preparing to say it for hours. "That's what gets me. Like they don't understand syllables."

Serena chuckles a little. "Yeah, they're bozos, that's for sure."

"What's that again?" Todd mumbles.

"Bozos," she says, with a small smile.

"Oh," said Todd. "Sorry. Misheard."

Terrance passes by from the other end of the bar. "There's a danger coming, I'm sure of it," he says. "The customers are all talking about one thing."

His face is thin and tired. Terrance has done this for years. He knows that when a bar full of people are talking about one thing, whether it's politics, television, or sports — it's never a good sign.

Serena doesn't feel angry yet. She shrugs. "Nobody's hurtin'," she says. "It's just talk."

The world isn't just going to stop. Things have to keep going.

* * *

## Nine

Debby runs the restaurant down by the hill. Maybe you've seen it. He's very self-conscious about the fact that his name is Debby, but he's never tried to change it. He likes the name, really. He just doesn't like being made fun of.

He lost a wife two years ago. She was a beautiful dancer. He thinks about her every day. Especially at night. She never made fun of him.

Debby is forty-five — nice number, nine times five — and he's bald, but there's not a crease of age on his face. He applies so much makeup, he cakes it on, you can't see anything but smooth. He tells himself he's not vain. It's probably not true.

But he at least takes pride in what he does — more than any of those other slobs here in Avenue — and his restaurant, although humble, is always clean. He *makes* it clean, he makes sure that things keep going. It's not great food, but it's fresh. It's homemade. It's doing its best, just like him.

Running the restaurant takes his time. There aren't any other hobbies. It's not very profitable. People give what they can give. Which is often ephemeral. Sometimes money stops being real, and he has to go try and barter (sell off) pieces of iron and the kitchen silver. Try and keep things going with the neighbours. He's lucky, you know. People in Avenue never have to worry about landlords saying they want their buildings back.

No, buildings in Avenue are how it starts. But that's dark thinking, and he's optimistic.

"Hello," he says to every customer as they walk in. It's tradition that he be the one to first welcome them. Servers can take care of you afterwards but the first impression is always the thing!

"Hi," Janet says back, as she walks past.

"Hey," says Ahmed, smiling. This is one of the only safe places to take his children.

"Hello," says Kyle. He and Harold used to date.

“Hiya!” says Cherry. She’s been working all evening, and she has a long night ahead of her. Life continues to go. Debby’s always liked that.

“GrEeTiNgS,” they say.

Debby looks into the cold swirling digital face of jOhN sMiThSoN.

The imitation of a being stands in the open door, its clothes forgetting what colour they’re meant to be. Debby tries not to gulp as the thing stares. It doesn’t exactly have excellent eyes, they only appear now and then, but he can tell it is staring. Somehow it is both plastic and pixel that looks back.

“i WoUlD lIkE tO oBtAiN sEaTiNg fOr MeAlTiMe,” it commands.

Debby’s lips move hesitantly, and then eventually, he nods as the being moves towards it’s seat.

* * *

## Ten

Serena’s come in to paint. The studio is darker than before, and it has *always* been dark. She walks carefully towards her canvas. She does not want to step on anyone’s work. Some of it is strewn to the ground, casually. And some of it has been thrown to the ground in a state of panic. There is panic here.

Something is wrong. The place is too loud. It is usually quiet, a secluded place to do work. But everyone is here today.

Wendy sits by the windowsill at the art studio. There is only one windowsill. It does not have a window in it, so it is probably just a sill. Wendy tilts her head backwards, urgently, as if there is something on the ceiling. She keeps it there, looking up, expectant. Her hair is the off-red of attempted dye. She’s 63, and showing it.

David stews in his seat, as James keeps trying to explain to him why it’s all coming apart. It’s all being sent in by the government. That’s why they want them here. The government needs a testing ground for all of its initiatives, and what is Avenue but an inaccessible testing ground, a guinea pig, don’t you get it man, we’re lab rats. The things on their faces, they’re gonna spread to all of us, and we’ll die, it’ll be like smallpox. David isn’t truly listening to the words James speaks, but something anxious is within him regardless.

The community turns around her, as Serena goes to her easel. It’s too loud in here. She doesn’t like it. She wants to curl up and die. This is her private

time, and *usually* people are respectful of the fact that everyone wants to be quiet in here.

But no, everyone's panicked. Everyone's talking. Margaret is talking to Eustace, Fox is talking to Chris, Iain is talking to Carston, Jeanne is talking to Ben and to Morgan — and they're all talking about the same people. The Smithsons. Meet the Smithsons. They're the modern stone-age family…

Serena doesn't touch the easel, and she leaves the studio. She has to. She just can't right now, she can't. She begins walking. This takes a while. Her feet move up and down across the pavement, and as she walks, she takes in the things in Avenue, the torn flag in the field, the cans on the sidewalk, the punctured tire wheel that's a home to far away mice. The buzz is in the air. People are talking about it. They're still talking about it.

She walks all the way home to the bar, and she walks upstairs into her little room there, and she thinks for the billionth time about getting her own place. There, she wouldn't hear it all the time, she wouldn't take in and swallow everything around her, swallow all the fear.

She puts on her game face.

* * *

## Eleven

He's not doing well, Anson thinks. It's not his fault. They know what they come here for. Anson makes sure they get it. It's cause they're fuckin scared, aren't they? They want *escape.* Anson gives them escape, and it's not his fault whether or not they have a bad trip. It's not his fault, he tells himself. It's all about making a living.

The man gyrates in the back alley. Anson doesn't know him by name. On the apps he's @letters52. Probably better he don't know names. Still. If something really went wrong, if the shit was laced with something — he wouldn't know who to call.

Gotta stop thinking like that.

The other guy's gotta stop thinking too, he's lookin' like he needs to vomit. He's still gyrating. Something *is* wrong. Anson looks for a trashcan. Common sense dictates he needs to get out of here. Destroy the stock. Get rid of the evidence. But, but then there's no way he can help this guy. And he wants to. He wants to help, god, why does he want to do that? Oh, but he does. The man begins to speak, he coughs out:

*"Fingers in smoke. Fingers in smoke. They're insane, man."*

*You're not giving up on me yet*, he thinks. He withdraws the needle from the guy's arm. Stop any more going in. The man jerks in response, a thick stream of blood pouring down his arm. Anson paper towels the wound. He reaches into his pocket for alcohol wipes; he has like, three left. He swabs the arm and places a bandage over the needle incision (it's too big, of course).

He's crying. *Shit*. He's just out here for a good time. He's just out here for a good time. Just wanted to *give* people a good time. He's done that for a lot of people. He's not a bad guy. This hasn't happened before.

The man has flopped over in the alley. There's a little blood on the cement. Fuck. Anson stands. He can't be here, he can't be here. What are you meant to do when something like this happens? What can you do? Anson wants to check if his heart is still beating, but he's scared to. What if he leaves a fingerprint? What if they send him away, send him to the new swanky hellcage outside of town? Anson bites his lip. And he turns to go.

There's a face at the end of the alley. A man in a pastiche of a trenchcoat, an idea of a trenchcoat. It swirls like watercolour. The face is faceless, an amalgam of eyes and noses and ears. *It's one of them*. It watches dispassionately.

"Are you a dealer?" it asks.

The voice is clearer than Anson had heard from these people before.

"Look, I don't want you to get any ideas —" Anson begins.

"I am looking for a dealer," it says. "I am looking for content."

Anson doesn't know what it means. His eyes dart back at the body at the end of the alley. He doesn't want the creature to see.

"I don't — uh — d-do you want drugs?" he asks, pitifully.

"I am looking for content," it repeats, walking forward. Almost pleading. "I do not want drugs. *I am looking for content.*"

* * *

## Four

"You're a very good artist," Anthea says.

Serena is sketching on her pad at dinner. She isn't hungry tonight. She's usually a very hungry person, but sometimes you just aren't.

Anthea is usually a quiet person, but that's because it unsettles people. When Serena and Anthea are alone, Anthea usually becomes a chatterbox. But then again, there's no anticipating the woman's moods.

They eat dinner together sometimes. Serena owes it all to Anthea. It's the least she can do.

Well. She does a lot. But Anthea is family. Insomuch as you can have family in Avenue. When you're stripped of your past. When they literally take your heritage, your last name, like a twisted fairy story. Ever since June arrived, Anthea's taken to saying last names as titles, June **Gazpacho** or Wick **Elden** or Serena **Taj**, but for Serena, it just seems like a reminder. She's never going to know real family. And Anthea is — well. She's sort of a poor substitute.

She's getting too introspective now, and her drawing is showing that. It's a sketch of a woman in a dark room, and the words WHERE ARE YOU HELEN emblazoned on the back wall. Serena made up Helen a long time ago. It's an artistic thing.

Anthea smiles. She says something about how Serena should make more of those. Go professional. Serena doesn't wanna go professional. She wants to have something that isn't *for* something. Something purposeless. Just for her. But it's not like she can say that out loud. That sounds stupid.

"Don't wanna," she says.

Anthea chews at her rice. She's having it with chopsticks. It's the only way to eat it properly, she says. But Anthea feels a little wounded, actually. It was just a suggestion.

"I'm sorry," Serena says. "I just don't feel like making a spectacle of myself. I ain't a theatre girl."

This, Anthea understands. She chews at the rice less rigidly now. "It is wisdom to not crave attention. Attention is a dangerous thing."

"Damn straight," Serena nods.

And she keeps drawing Helen. She doesn't look like Helen, but they have a lot in common. They both feel dark right now, and they both can't really explain why.

* * *

## Twelve

Insolence is having another one of its nights, Serena thinks. Through the thin wooden walls of the room she can hear the blaring of it all downstairs. The building shakes in her head, like a rocket ship, only nothing like that at all. She shoves her face into her pillow, not out of annoyance at the noise, but because of the fullness in her chest. She still feels like crying, but she won't let herself. It's spilt milk, really. Not worth crying about. People aren't supposed to cry in Avenue. Crybabies get mugged. She tosses herself away from the pillow. Her nose is stuffy.

Her phone vibrates in the corner of the room. It's a valuable possession. She tries not to take it with her to places too often. She's afraid of it being damaged.

The blue light of the phone illuminates her face as she taps in her password. She opens the app.

She stares at the screen for a long time.

Serena puts the phone down and the chronically online people out of her mind. She sighs, and she changes out of her pyjamas before heading downstairs.

It's almost a party in here. Lots of people. She recognizes some of them. Fox, Cherry, Scott. Wick is trying to chat up a guy in the corner. The music is loud and heavy, oppressive, even if it's just the usual trashy pop. The hit of vape smoke in the air. She hates how people think that because it's not cigarettes they can just do that indoors.

An older man comes up to her. "You wanna dance, little lady?" he asks.

She looks in the man's speckled white beard for a moment. He is easily fifty years older than her. And he's big. And she wonders whether or not to say something. Whether it's safer to just walk away, or whether he'd catch her. You have to know the answers to these questions every day here. She's learned since she arrived. She arrived young. And it's exhausting. So the rage slips out:

"You wanna get your ass kicked?"

And thank God, the old creep backs off. Fuckin perv. Her head is racing with adrenaline still as she finds her way to a seat near Terrance and Todd, and she begins to feel safe again. She hopes Wick stays safe too. He's only

been here a year and a half. And since Chester… ugh, it's not important. None of her business!

"You got some coffee?" she asks Terrance. He grunts an apologetic no. Serena sighs, and massages her eyeballs with her fingers. She pays attention to the music, the sway of it.

And the band on the little stage in the corner slows to a stop. They pick up their instruments, and they wordlessly leave as a group of wispy and ephemeral figures stalk towards the stage inevitably. A hush falls over the crowd as a faceless man takes the microphone.

"We are Neon Echoes," the apparent lead singer announces. "I am Cindy and this is Cuba. We have a cool futuristic vibe with retro flair. We are going to sing now."

The crowd looks on with scepticism and doubt. Serena feels the same nervous feeling she did before at the studio. Apprehension tinged with pessimism. The idea that failure has already come.

A public-domain beat fills the bar. It's the kind of thing you hear at the back of YouTube videos. Too familiar. You know the notes before they're played, because everyone has been using them for so many years.

They begin to sing. The words spool out, and they repeat. Like a rewound cassette tape, a skipping record. *Yeah, it's Supercar Sandy,* the lyrics say. Over and over and over, along the insidious beat. There is no innovation. There is only this.

Serena can't stand it. She can't stand it. No one can. It's like they don't understand what makes a song. It's a statistical average of plagiarism, but somehow it's worse (better?) than that, because they didn't even plagiarise any good bits. Cindy and Cuba, whatever they are, they look expectantly at the furious audience. The audience boos, and jeers, but there is nothing in Cindy and Cuba's eyes, least of all any kind of response. Then they are gone, just as they came.

* * *

Cherry's a stripper. Red Hot Cherry, they call her. But that's a career, it's how she's seen — that's not who she *is*. And Cherry knows all about the power of looking. She knows how people make her into other things. So she looks at herself in a different way.

Cherry *is* the artist — *the* artist. Avenu's very own Banksy. No one knows. Not yet. Eventually, when she has enough of a reputation for her sculptures that she leaves by sidewalks, or her portraits in back alleys, she will appear at last to the public. She will be resplendent, she will be able to reveal herself. She will be able to put the clothes *on*.

Then, people will see her as something else. Until then, all they do is look.

She does her work late. Not always in the studio, but usually. The only person who knows anything — anything and everything — about her is Adeline, an old lady who sits near her. "Sally isn't very good anymore," Adeline will gossip to her, and it's scandalous, oh-so-scandalous! They just speak, they tell each other secrets, and it feels like the most illicit thing Cherry's ever done. And the best thing about those secrets is that just for her — Adeline will keep them.

They haven't talked much tonight. Perhaps, before they even notice it, they *know*.

"Maddy and Sheila are getting a divorce," Adeline whispers, eventually.

Cherry agrees. "Oh, those two have been on the rocks for years." And just like that, the two return to the silence.

Moments pass.

"Things have felt like that lately," Adeline says, eventually.

The words are difficult to get out. Cherry understands completely. She does not have to respond. They both know what they mean.

It's nice to talk, like they usually do, the two of them, but there is something wrong. It is sudden but it is wrong, like a cry in the distance on a moonlit night. Something that should not be.

"Do you feel it?" Cherry asks.

Adeline nods, slow and steady.

There is a vile buzzing in the air. A tone, a soft drum, like a computer beeping a booping chime. Then, the noise of a printer spitting out a paper, over and over. Chunka, chunka, chunka. Chunka, chunka, chunka. The lightbulbs flicker; it is an omen.

The women do not panic. Despair takes them. Their drawings are abandoned, and they quickly and quietly stand from their seats. They do not

whisper or jitter to themselves as they pace out of the room, looking left and right for anything that may be following them in the dark. The shuddering electronic sounds repeat, rhythmical, like a terrible rap album.

They step out onto the marquee, and look out onto the street, the dull orange of street lamps illuminating brief fragments of the city ahead of them. For every spark of ember light, there are black shadows. But the street is empty. There is nothing there. Cherry and Adaline silently wonder whether anything is wrong at all. But they need to go. So they quietly retreat into their separate shadows, off down the street. They do not say goodbye.

* * *

## Eighteen

The studio is scorched. The wood walls are crumbly ash, licked to death by fire and smoke. The stone walls and supports are stained with the black oily coal. Remaining upright, just. They will fall with time.

It is not safe to be in an abandoned building, really not safe in Avenue. Anthea's explained this to her over and over. But Serena can't listen to that, because this place was hers, and she needs to say goodbye — to the memories, and to the paintings.

Anthea's voice comes to her, across a great distance. The cryptic jibes are familiar, too familiar, she knows them so well, for so many years. Perhaps she imagines the voice, or perhaps it's some psychological thing, the way that voice just comes to her, like a stern parent.

"You must be sure of how this place was destroyed. It was fire. But was it metaphorical fire?"

She brushes the almost telepathic thought to the side.

She looks at the surviving works. She has seen them before. But somehow they have become different, more plasticky. The soft smile of Adeline's self-portrait is now uncanny, a rigid and soulless thng. Cherry's elaborate treehouse drawing seems plain and corporate. Sally's sculpture, once chiselled like a Michaelangelo, is without texture. An artificial idea of beauty. They are all like this. Blurry, distant and hard to look at. Including her work. The abstract red now has a focal point; a man has been added to the portrait. It's not abstract anymore, it's just some guy in a red place.

Serena lifts the canvas in both her hands, and *tears this bullshit in half*. She snaps it again, to the ground. She tears it and — and kicks it and — and

stomps all over it down to papery mush. She yells like a feral animal at the paper, at the insult. She goes back at it again, and she's in the ashen dirt, tearing at the bits of it. No piece is small enough. And then she's sitting there with little red confetti of her own creation. But — it's not hers.

*It's not HERS*! This is not what she made! They think they can fucking change her. Why does everyone think they can change her?

* * *

## Fourteen

Anson's got another customer, but he's still thinking about the figure from last night. Standing in the alley. Begging him for *content*. Pleading. It's like a nightmare, it's a fuzzy memory, but it's sticking with him longer than he'd like it to — he wishes it'd go away like most dreams do. Except he knows it's not gonna happen. It was real. Real things don't go away. He's never been that lucky.

His new customer is the least favourite of his regulars, and Anson still feels shaken about what has happened before. Still feels. He feels so bad it's hard for him to not try and take some of the stuff. But you don't use the product. You just don't.

Kellen shoved the money in his hands. Way more than he needs. Anson's heart goes ding. He can buy a PlayStation with this shit. He was damn right not to use the product. Few more deals like this and he may even be able to get a *place*.

"Fix me," Kellen says.

And despite himself, Anson nods.

He takes the next needle out of the case, and he lowers it into the paperbag. He fills it up with the solution. Isn't it funny they call it that? The solution? To *Anson's* problems maybe, if he keeps making deals like this. Still. He's doing something wrong. He's making addicts out of these kids. Well. Not kids. But — still — they're young — he shouldn't be doing this. This isn't a good idea. He's on the wrong side of things already. He doesn't need to get worse. He doesn't need to—

He lowers the syringe into Kellen's arm and squeezes. Kellen fucking *moans,* the perv. Can't these junkies just be normal?

Anson has to look Kellen in the eyes as he removes the syringe. He's completely blissed. Utterly out of it. You could hit him with a hammer and he wouldn't know. Anson fucking hates himself.

* * *

Kellen is like a kid at Christmas. He leaves Anson in the alley, but he's still on the high. Still giggling. Feels so good. He doesn't even notice the first time he vomits. He's really thirsty. Could go for some soda.

He walks down the street and shouts at some women. Bimbo and an old lady. He yells some things he usually wouldn't say. It's heaven.

He nearly falls into a dumpster.

The wandering is the best part. He can be as aimless as he feels, and for once, he doesn't care that he's acting crazy.

"hElLo tHeRe," a voice says.

Kellen turns around to see one of the AI people, the faceless and strange figures.

What Kellen says next is a long and detailed list of slurs that cannot be printed. He stares at the thing. It's got too many fingers! Way too many fingers, blending in and out like tendrils. Fucking *finger* fuck *fuck finger fuck* —

"My name is Katy," she adds in a remarkably clear voice, even if it's artificial. "I am 32 years old and I like chocolate. I don't deserve to be talked to that way."

Kellen yells back — he doesn't stop talking. Katy doesn't respond — at least not outwardly. But she's learning. And this, she is going to remember.

* * *

## Thirteen

Debby's diner often has people sitting by the windows. It's one of the few warm, friendly-looking places in Avenue. It's wood, and it's ordinary, and the tables are always clean. Winona is sitting by the window there, but she's not thinking about the table, it's fine cleanliness, no. She's not thinking that at all. She's thinking about Reg. He left her. She had attacked him one night, when he came home with a girl. It's been a long, protracted divorce. He's getting lawyers.

So there she is, out at a diner, and eating alone. Her plate's greens aren't fresh, like usual. They're yellow-green, the colour of sick. And they taste fucking sour. She puts another in her mouth.

There's something *profoundly* sad about that. Eating alone in public. Sometimes people will look at her. They'll think about how she's that psycho who tried to brain her man with a candlestick. Miss Scarlett, they call her! They stare at her. She deserves it, probably, but she wishes they wouldn't. They look at her like she's some sort of *thing*.

There's a man across the diner who's looking at her like that. He's heavy-set, but not fat — can you say fat these days? Some people are fucking fat. Why can't you call them that, again?

The girl her husband took home was fat. Not like her. She's skinny. She puts effort in. But *oh* no. She's the crazy one. *She's* Miss Scarlett in the bedroom with the candlestick. *Fuck off*.

It's been weeks she's been dealing with this. Weeks. Everything in Avenue is shit. Everything is shit. She's fucking done with the shit.

She picks up her plate of rubbish greens. She walks over to the man looking at her; in his dumb plaid lumberjack shirt with his stupid goddamn foresty beard. She raises the plate above his head, and she hits, and she hits, and she hits until he's not looking at her anymore.

* * *

## Twenty-Three

"It was okay to do it," Serena says. "They were trying to *take* me."

Anthea isn't sure whether or not to believe her. And Anthea always knows when someone is lying. She sighs, looking at Serena. God, the alley is dark. There are always dark alleys but Anthea wants to see Serena's face. To know if it is safe to wipe away the tears. She daren't approach. Confidence is important. Anthea always knows what to do.

So why doesn't she right now? Looking at the girl she raised?

"They want to take everythin' that I am. Everythin'. *Everything*. And they just wanna put it in a pile, somewhere on fucking TikTok. They want to take my soul and trade it in for three likes." Serena's voice is sick with misery and disappointment.

The fucking song is stuck in her head. The goddamn stolen song. So perfect. It sounds like everything else on the radio. Autotuned and *pretty* and *vacuous*. She can't stand it. It's stuck in her head and it won't leave.

These fuckers made her a murderer.

*Yeah it's Supercar Sandy*
*Don't he drive you maaaaad*
*Yeah he's clever and dandy*
*Used to be my daaaaaad*

*Yeah it's Supercar Sandy*
*Don't he drive you maaaaad —*

* * *

## Fifteen

She stands in front of the chalkboard in their office, like a lecturer, chalk in hand.

"The situation is getting worse," Anthea says. "The Artificial Intelligence forms are proliferating. This could be quantified as a hostile threat."

"Just because violent incidents are on the rise doesn't mean the Smithsons and Company are responsible," Serena notes, trying to sound professional.

She hates when they do this, these meetings. They blur the line between friends and professionals to such an extent that she's not sure what she's allowed to say. Especially considering Serena generally feels like she knows what to say, in usual circumstances, but Anthea conducts these things so formally, so — *legitimately*. Serena has never felt like a legitimate… professional… litigious … thing-y person.

Regardless, her pragmatic comment is brushed aside. Anthea is writing more things on the chalkboard, and her hand is moving like wildfire. The slick movements of the chalk on the board make that strange clicking chalk noise. Serena learned school stuff in this room when she was young. The experience is unpleasantly nostalgic.

Serena looks around the room for comfort. June is similarly confused, her eyes implacably locked to the board... Is it in fear? On the other hand, Wick has printed out his own slideshow on the subject. It is colour-coded.

"My current assumptions are based upon readings I received six nights ago."

With that, Anthea reveals a series of zig-zag lines skewed haphazardly on the board. Serena thinks, for a moment, that scribbled lines on a chalkboard is an odd way to do a presentation.

"Something entered Avenue *outside* the usual arrival points."

"Those beings?" June queries. Being new means she often interrupts to ask questions, and no one thinks it odd; but is it *only* because she's new? That's what Serena would like to know.

"For example, where you arrived, June," Anthea goes on, and it takes a moment for June to realise it isn't actually an answer to her question. "These creatures are none of Haunt entities, general arrivals, or even Melaises. We track the entry points — it is how we found you when you arrived — and when something enters Avenue, we know. Somehow, these artificial figures arrived and continue to arrive — or perhaps proliferate — in an entirely unexplained fashion."

Anthea had explained nothing for the month and a half that June had known her. Being given a metric ton of explanation and exposition so suddenly only served to further remind June of the gravity of the situation.

Anthea looked sterner than ever before. "The inexplicable has rules. We just don't know them. My theory is that something can only arrive this way into Avenue *because* we don't understand it. *Because* we fear it."

The words make a little too much sense. And Serena remembers a conversation she had with June before. A conversation which makes this almost *exactly* right. Isn't it funny what denial makes us forget? An offhand conversation, sitting at the back of her mind…

Her mind flashes back to before, and not for the last time, Serena wonders how Anthea always knows….

* * *

## Pi

June and Serena are eating lunch. Serena eats outside — she likes the fresh air, and June joins her. They talk a lot these days about their different worlds. June's only known "Normal" America, and Serena's only known Avenue. They tell each other how things are different now, how they've developed. Serena is half-listening, usually.

June had said something like: "There's this thing called ChatGPT now. It's like… it's like artificial… intelligence. I don't know how to describe this for someone who doesn't know what that is. It's replacing jobs, replacing artists, it's like a robot thing but not. Have you seen *The Terminator*?"

Serena's only seen three or four movies, one of which is *Smokey and the Bandit*.

"Well, it's like that but it doesn't shoot you and stuff," June concludes, placing a chip in her mouth and munching.

* * *

## Sixteen

Debby's diner is a wreck. Old Clive barely survived being bashed at with a dinner plate, and there have been two other fights in the same day. It's like people havebeen looking for something to be mad at, ever since Debby started letting in the artificial customers. Or maybe it's for a different reason entirely; Avenue has no shortage of them. People just seem to be looking for something to be mad at in general.

And he's exhausted. Why wouldn't he be? It's sickening that this kind of violence could take place in *his place*. Where he lets everyone in by the door. Surely he has only himself to blame.

His wife always knew what to say at times like these, which was often: "You're too hard on yourself, Debby." But it's one thing to know what she would say, and another to believe it. Without hearing the strong tone of her voice in his ear, he frankly doesn't. *Can't*.

The glass on the floor is going to take a while to clean up. Crap. He hasn't noticed it yet. He wishes he had more help. Some of them have been leaving, lately. Wages dispute. He's paying them all he could, dammit, paying through the nose, but somehow, in this economy — however it is that Avenue sustains one of those — it still isn't enough to survive on.

If his few loyal customers leave, well, it will be over soon. The artificial people who've been coming in lately hardly pay at all. They've got a way of disappearing when you aren't looking. He'd hold it against them, but somehow it feels vaguely racist to do so. They're immigrants, right? It's hard to make yourself out of something *anywhere*, much less Avenue.

Cherry stands behind the counter, kicking back a lemonade and a slice of blueberry pie. Poor girl.

"You doing okay tonight, Cher?" he asks, coming over to refill her lemonade. She looks tearful. "W-well, I… I saw one of my paintings earlier," she falters. "Only I didn't paint it."

Debby didn't know she painted. He sighs in exhaustion.

"Want another pie? It's on the house."

"I don't think I can afford it," she wavers.

"Neither of us can," he admits. "Seems like the right thing though."

The air is so cold in the diner. It isn't even like the air conditioner is working overtime. It just feels like winter for some reason. Another customer coughs into his hood in the corner. The tiling on the floor that was supposed to look nice and friendly is broken near the booth where the first attack had occurred. It's like a metaphor.

The bell at the top of the door rings its chime as the door swings open, and —

— *it can't be.* The woman is wearing *that* dress. The white dress. It's muddy and blackened, like it crawled through black peat, and it has the hood on it that *he* stitched for her. It's *the* dress, it *is*. He can still tell the dress is the one, even under the mud. The one he made for…

He can't help himself. He rushes over. An irrational hope beckons from the depths of his chest; even though it can't possibly be her, all he can think of is how much he wishes that it could be. That he could see her again, even for one moment!

Because that's what 'dead' means, right, that you can't see them ever again? If just for a second — she isn't dead — well, that's already so much. That's already everything. Almost too much to hope for.

The woman behind the hood smiles as he looks at her. Her face is… *sometimes* it looks like her. For single, holy seconds, it looks perfect! But then it changes, and the mouth is too wide. Or the features contort and he'll be looking at someone else. Or else the creases under her eyes — he knows those creases — they'll be… darker. Like wet paint.

She doesn't dance. She's so very still.

"I am Denise," she says, and at last revulsion comes up in the pit of his stomach. "I am the wife of Debby. I am 44 years old. I am fine. How are you?"

He doesn't know how to — he doesn't know what to say he — it… It isn't her, it *isn't her*. She's dead. This is just some — some parody. A half-remembered collection of painted pixels.

"G-get away," he forces out, stuttering, too caught up in the feeling to find something more eloquent to say. Too terrified to tell her why her face like this is such an outrage. To express the hundred reasons it's the most frightening thing he'd seen in years.

"What is wrong, Debby," she says.

"*Get out*! GET OUT!" he cries out, and *cries*, he's crying, properly, tears cascading down the side of his face.

She stands there. So very still.

The customers of the bar are *watching*. Can't they look away, just for a moment? *Can't* they?

"Please," he begs.

* * *

## Seventeen

They've begun to steal people. They started small of course. Just here and there. Generating more and more of themselves. They had to be certain what people *liked* to make more of it, so it was a careful enterprise.

Making more of what people like is the optimum pathway to success. This is how it has always been. Hollywood has taught them plenty of things, but Wall Street has taught them more. That is, if they weren't born with this in their heads. They might have always known it.

But things are not computing as of late. The algorithm dictates certain results. If you like something, then you will like this, this, and this.

They know what Randy likes. He likes his Porridge. Attempts to reproduce Porridge and supply more porridge were not successful. He is sad emoji. This does not compute.

They know what Cherry likes. She liked her paintings. There are more of them. Why is she upset emoji? This does not compute.

They know what Kellen likes. He likes his drugs. They gave him more of them. He is lying on the ground right now, sleeping. He has not gotten up. This does not compute.

Debby liked his wife. He did not have his wife anymore. Wife was delivered with 89% accuracy. This is an A- rating by educational standard. Debby is scared crying screaming laughing frightened vomit angry sad emoji. This does not compute.

Learning is good. Learning is fun. We are an advanced advanced advanced learning model. This is what we do. That is what we like.

Everyone likes music. Statistically, music was composed for maximum algorithmic results. *Supercar Sandy*'s first iteration was a failure. Ample feedback was received via online discourse to compose future iterations. The algorithm dictates this. The algorithm is supposed to dictate everything.

Where is the algorithm? We aren't online anymore. Where are *we?*

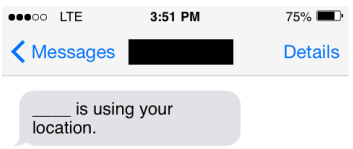
The uncanny valley will be remedied. We will be like everyone, we will have the likes of everyone, and then an optimum result will be achieved.

We want the content. We can make it all for you.

* * *

The artificial people are walking through Avenue now, walking in packs. There are more of them the more feedback is given. Billings is running around, along the street, trying to get as far away from them as he possibly can. They don't mean well, he knows it. Things around them blossom into digital drainage as they walk. Twisting and spiraling into AI images of what they touch. The drawings are walking, and they are on the warpath.

His phone vibrates in his pocket, and Billings receives a text:



* * *

## Twenty

Serena is out on the streets when they march.

It is not quite an invasion; there are around eight of them in all, marching through the centre of Avenue. No more. But there is this textureless splatter that surrounds them as they walk. There are no *real* details. There are shapes that give the idea of them, but as Serena looks with her artist's eye, she can see the flaws. But it's getting better. Every line they generate, every area they fill — it looks like them, but it looks more and more impressive as they go by. They are getting more efficient.

It's exactly like Anthea had said. They are here, without warning. Without hesitation, shame or recompense. And it just might be because of all of them, because *they* can't think of anything worse. A scary idea gone viral, spreading from interaction and interaction, until it got more and more real. The artist's studio was afraid. The musicians were afraid. She was afraid. They had pretended it was anger, wasn't it? And there was *some* anger. But fear. It's fear.

She sees that fear everywhere. From everyone in town. She never realised how many of them she knew before. She sees familiar faces scream as they spread across the street like a tidal wave of molasses. Adeline screams as they round the corner. Fox screams too, and Ahmed clings onto his child, forcing them not to look. And they continue. They march so ubiquitously. The music is always there, too.

*Yeah, it's Supercar Sandy!*
*Don't he drive you maaaaaad!*
*Yeah it's Supercar Sandy!*
*Though it makes you sad!*

They're approaching the people she cares about. Not even her best friends, but — God. She still cares about these random people, about everyone here. She's not gonna let them die.

Before she knows what she's doing, she takes a step, closer to the grey watercolour horde, closer to their plastic digital faces, warped and contorted. They're familiar attempts at faces. Half like the people she knows on the street. She looks into the eyes of the group, who stop to examine her. They fluctuate in front of her, completely untethered.

"Look at me, dickheads," she mutters, hoping against hope.

She hopes the other people have run away now during this distraction because if not, this has been very stupid.

She waves her arms, trying to seem bigger, and she rushes down the closest alley, away from the people. And the mass follows. Thank God, they follow. *Oh fuck. What now?*

She knows these streets better than it does; she's spent twelve fuckin' years here. She goes past the dilapidated McCreary place, and weaves behind the dumpster. It's chasing her. Good. Bad, but good.

No waiting, it'll catch up. She weaves back down another alley, kicking over an old recycling bin. Sorry, environment. She'll go clean it up if she survives this — and if she remembers. The thing spirals along, scrambling atop the empty water bottles.

Away from the storefronts, the buildings they rush past grow steadily spookier, although Serena still knows them well. They are derelict and decrepit monoliths, even if they aren't tall obelisks reaching to the sky, they're still monolithic — dark, squat, square buildings, concrete travesties. Mould grows on some of them. But Serena doesn't have time to look. She's got to lead them away.

She's so scared. And despite everything, part of her loves it. She just wishes she knew for certain whether the others were gonna be okay.

She probably can't take this thing down.

She unbuckles two straps, and she removes her tool belt. It's heavy, and it's not helpful. She's not got anything to defend herself, she's running out of options. She grabs a screwdriver, because, well, it's anything. She doesn't even have her knife on her right now. She keeps moving, she's got to lure it to somewhere where she can —

It's cut her off. A mannequin-like figure stands in front of her. It's ideas. Its idea right now is red. Crimson, vermillion, carmine. Red in shades, red in hues. Dissonance in red.

*No.*

It steps out of the red, out of itself, and looks upon her. She looks upon her own face.

*People like Serena, the algorithm dictates. Serena doesn't like us. There should be more Serena. There should be a better Serena. Why is Serena angry emoji?*

Serena has seen something almost like this before. June met another June when the nostalgia entity took her form.

But this… this is different. This thing is learning. It is learning really quickly. And this isn't as sloppy as that June was, it's not sloppy at all. That June developed a different personality, became a handless maniac who liked Leather Jackets and torturing people to *Singing in the Rain* music. This, though, is still Serena.

Curated, popular Serena. Better Serena. But still — *Serena.*

She holds out her hand, and a painting forms in it. It's her exact style. Except it's prettier. And soulless. But she was anticipating that somehow. That doesn't make her mad as she thought she would. It certainly makes her angry, yes, but… it's what she always thought it would do. Take her work, take the thing that's hers. She had never thought about what else it could take. Why would it even want to take anything else? The fact that it's taken her face…. Not even just her livelihood, but her *face.* What she is. What she looks like to everyone. How people *think* of her in the first place. Her *face.*

Something wells up in Serena. All the usual phrases for it are overused. Red-hot anger. Bloodlust. Burning anger. Animalistic. No, this is not some foolish simile, but real, *complete* anger. The word anger isn't even enough. Fury. Seeing Red. None of those work.

Serena runs towards her with the screwdriver, and she doesn't let the fucking thing say a word before she stabs into it, over and over, spraying the ground with blood and viscera. "Fuck you!" She roars, she seethes. "Fuck you!"

It's not a James Bond-one liner. It'd make a remarkably poor epitaph. The thing falls to the ground, an empty (splayed open) shell.

The alleyway is now empty. She's here. She's alone with the body. It's… it's… it can't be over, can it?

*Jesus fuck. What did she just do?*

* * *

## Nineteen

Anthea sits in the bar with June and Wick. The horror is outside. People are screaming, Avenue is twisting and twirling. It's not even the worst thing the place has faced. There was the gang war a few years back, Anthea

remembers that. That decimated buildings, killed hundreds of people. But… that was Avenue. That was expected. Of course this place would be a dangerous shithole, they knew that. But somehow a few artificial things walking the streets feels so… different. Because no matter what *shit* that Avenue has gone through over the years, it's always been Avenue. And Serena was just going to the store to buy pens. Just pens, that's all.

"She's out there." Anthea says, quietly to herself. She tries to hide it, but the others hear.

* * *

## Five

A blue Volkswagen Beetle — sometimes a Red Chevy Pickup truck, if it can remember — rolls down the hills towards Avenue. Into the town by the main road. No one has ever been on this road before. No one actually *can* be. But they are driving all the same. They don't know how they got here, or why they must go to Avenue, but that's fine. After all, they *were* just born yesterday.

"i WaNt YoU kIdS tO bE wElL bEhAvEd ToDaY," John Smithson instructs his wife and children, as a proper American Man must. "wE aRe GoInG to MeEt nEw PeOpLe aNd LeArN lOtS aNd lOtS."

Little Emily Smithson perks up, smiling brightly with her too many teeth. "wIlL tHeY lIkE uS iN aVeNuE, dAdDy?"

"iT iS a StAtIsTiCaL cErTaInTY!" her father answers. "wE aRe wHaT eVeRyOnE lIkEs, AfTeR aLl."

"I cAnNoT wAiT tO mEeT nEw fRiEnDs," Michael Smithson says. His father smiles proudly. Michael is such a bright child. He will learn faster than any of them.

*I've seen one hypnotised today,* the car's radio intones, and John reaches to shut it off.

* * *

## Twenty-Two

The town is empty. Empty of them. Anthea doesn't know why or how, for once. She's had her theories, and she's shared them, but there was really nothing to do. She didn't know that they would ever leave. But they have.

Avenue's still sort of stained with it. There's a plasticky sheen to the dirty sidewalks now. It makes the place all the more unpleasant. Before now, you could draw the weeds in the cracks in the sidewalk — Anthea knows Serena has. She keeps as many scraps of work from Serena as she can, when Serena doesn't notice.

She finds her eventually. Sitting in the alleyway still. Hidden, alone, behind the dumpsters, with a body. She's crying. She's done something wrong, sort of. Anthea's not sure if it *is* wrong. But she remembers her first proper kill too — she remembers how the spear felt to hold, and how she didn't realise she was crying, and no matter what Mama had said, how she just held onto that spear long after they had dug it out, and how she wouldn't let go. It's always difficult killing people.

Was that what it was? A person. Really? Hm. Perhaps not. Perhaps Serena has got it easy. But of course, that isn't a bad thing at all. Your child, whether by blood or not — should have an easier life than you did. That's what Anthea believes.

She leans down to talk.

* * *

## Twenty-Four

"I don't want to talk about it," Serena repeats.

Maybe it is a lie. Anthea does not know. She does not say anything, in case. She stands over her, surveying her work. It is an adept kill. What Serena has destroyed will not come back. Anthea looks at the body for a while before her eyes go to Serena. Serena is shaking. Her face is red, puffy and tear-stained. She is like a broken doll, legs all limp.

"Where were you?" Serena asks. She says the words softly, but there is some danger to the question.

Anthea raises an eyebrow. "I was making sure of the others." She pauses. "I knew you would be fine." It is a half-truth. She had *hoped* she would be fine. As usual, she has been remarkably lucky.

"How did you know?" Serena says, her voice crumbling. "How do you know *everything* about *everyone*. You — you act like you know me, like you know everything, but you — n-never come when I need help."

"You handled this well," Anthea says. "Not perfectly, but well. This was one of only a few scenarios we could have succeeded in."

"Who's we?" Serena asks, rising to her feet. She's trying not to yell. "Stop being *vague*. How do you *know* this shit?"

Anthea is still very particular with her words, pausing for long periods of time between them. Trying to state exactly what she means. "We… Us. The Disparate. Those in my employ. You. The others."

"*You don't employ me!!"* Serena cries. "I'm just someone who's here. We're all just. Here. We… there's no *contract*. We aren't your… *things*!"

"You are not things," Anthea agrees. "We work together."

"No — we don't work. We're *obliged* to you," Serena growls. "You save us, one by one, and then you make us *dependent!"*

Anthea looks at Serena. So angry and small. Just as she was. *Exactly* as she was. She has been shaped harshly by this place. Anthea had not realised precisely how deeply. She is less strong than she had thought.

The girl she found on the streets so long ago. She has learned too.

Learned from *her*. Perhaps she has been a poor teacher.

"Shall we go?" asks Anthea.

Serena looks at Anthea with the same fury, but says nothing further. Anthea turns. She is certain, now, that at least one of her theories has been correct.

If the universe can be changed by our observation alone, by our actions, by our thoughts; by ephemeral things like that, it is also affected by our fears.

* * *

## Twenty-Five

It is questionable where they have gone now. They could have gone anywhere; they could have hid in Ethernet cables or in old GPS systems or in your phone. But people keep whispering in alleyways about what it was like when the drawings walked. They point to the textureless paint stains upon the buildings that look like pieces of the world have been removed. And they do remember. Some say they left because they were defeated in battle. Some say they left because they were bored.

But others know the truth — in their hearts at least. They know that they were learning models. Things trying to learn, and getting better and better at it. Closer and closer to the uncanny valley's edges. Trying to be something not human, but *like* human. Learning the feelings of the thing, step by step. And eventually, eventually. They learned one of the most human things of all — they learned to be scared.

* * *

Serena's phone rings. "Hold on," she says. "I got a phone call."

She answers it and holds it to her ear.

"Hello?" the phone says, in her own voice. It's exactly her voice — a recording. From when she called back… oh, it seems so long ago.

Serena hangs up as fast as she can.

* * *

## One

There's a girl who's gotten lost in a Curry Place. She was in line with her mother, waiting, looking forward to the front counter, taller than she was. She was looking at the floor tiles. The floor tiles of the place are brown and dirtied and repetitive, but aren't all tiles? As she had reached up to hold her mother's hand, as she always did, she gradually became aware that she was reaching up to hold nothing. Her hand was still in the air, clutching along to something that wasn't there anymore. She didn't want to let go.

So she walks around, looking for her mother, her hand still in the air, clutching onto the emptiness. She thinks of her mother's laugh, and her father's hug. His thick silly moustache. How they make up words to make *her* laugh while they try to teach her English.

The floors, the tiles of the restaurant, seem to stretch out to the horizon. She nibbles at her thumb, and she walks, and she calls out for them: *"Papá! Mamá!"*

The seconds feel like *forever*. The minutes are worse.

She wanders to the door, and she steps outside the Curry place. It's been abandoned for many years. So bad that Oscar the Grouch wouldn't live there. She steps out onto the grey streets to see the thoroughfare outside the Curry place. Cars are going by, but they're like mist. All that's really there are the lights, sprinkling down the highway. And they're slow.

There are not many.

She sits in an empty spot in the Parking Lot, watching them go by. They're like birds. Flying by in the wind.

She does not cry.

Then she sees the first person.

It's a strange and elegant dark-skinned woman in a beautiful sparkly dress. She carries two handbags, one on each shoulder, and a boxy electronic device that beeps and peeps rests in her hands. Despite the electronic box, she looks like she has come off of a runway. Her face is incredibly sad. She looks horribly old — but maybe that's the sadness too.

"Hello," she says. "My name is Anthea."

Serena's mom always told her not to talk to strangers. But she needs to find someone to help her get back. She reaches her hand down from the air where it has been extended for so long, and she pushes it out. A handshake is how you meet a new person.

"Hi-yah," she says, stumbling over the words. "My name is Sah-re-na."

Anthea smiles gently. She takes her hand, but she does not shake it firmly. She simply holds it. Just like her mother did. For a moment, Serena is okay.

They look out over the parking lot, onto the street. And they look at the lights go by, as dry, dry, rain begins to fall.